

FINDINGS: USCIRF continues to be concerned about religious freedom conditions in Laos. The Lao government continues to restrict religious practices through its legal code, but has permitted increased freedom of worship in some cases. Conditions have incrementally improved for Lao Buddhists and for some religious minority groups in urban areas. Nonetheless, during the past year, conditions have deteriorated for some religious minorities, particularly ethnic minority Protestants in provincial areas. The Lao government is either unwilling or unable to curtail completely the activities of provincial officials that severely violate the freedom of religion or belief, including detentions, surveillance, harassment, threats of property loss, forced relocations, and forced renunciations of faith. However, Lao officials in charge of religious affairs reportedly intercede occasionally with provincial officials to mitigate some of the worst mistreatment of ethnic minority religious groups.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF maintains Laos on its Watch List in 2010. The Commission had removed Laos from the Watch List in 2005, citing the Lao government's steps to address serious religious freedom concerns in advance of the U.S. decision to grant Laos permanent normal trade relations (PNTR). Given the rising number of religious freedom abuses targeting ethnic and religious minorities, the Commission returned Laos to its Watch List in 2009.

Since Laos was granted PNTR status in 2005, religious freedom conditions improved somewhat, though the Lao government's toleration of religious practice varies by region and religious group. Buddhism, which is closely associated with Lao culture and is practiced by the vast majority of the population, is now generally free from the restrictions and oversight faced by some other religious groups. In urban areas, leaders of religious minority groups report few restrictions on their worship activities and the government has allowed them to re-open, build, and expand some new venues in recent years. For example, Lao Catholics were allowed to build churches and ordain new priests, the first since 1975. However, serious problems remain on the local level, particularly in the provinces of Bolikhamsai, Houaphan, Salavan, Luan Prabang, Attapeu, Oudamsai, and Luang Namtha. Reports of detentions, threats, and forced renunciations of faith spiked in the past year. Most recent religious freedom abuses center on the small, but fast growing, Lao Evangelical Church and related Protestant denominations.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: The United States and Laos have expanded relations in recent years. U.S. assistance focuses on humanitarian programs, economic development, trade expansion, military training, and issues remaining from the Vietnam War. The United States continues to express concern and seek transparent mechanisms to track ethnic Hmong repatriated from Thailand. The U.S. government has sponsored training for Lao officials on international religious freedom and the protection of religious minorities in practice and law. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government initiate human rights and religious tolerance training for the Lao military as part of new U.S. programs to raise military professionalism and provide additional economic assistance to help to monitor and resettle Lao Hmong repatriated from Thailand. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Laos can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Laos and by following this link:

<http://www.uscirt.gov/images/ar2010/laos2010.pdf>